# Battling School Violence With Mediation Technology

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Post World War II parents sent their children off to public schools moderately secure in the prevailing belief that their neighborhood schools were a safe haven for their young offspring. Boys and girls could be expected to receive even more than an excellent basic education. Caring teachers and administrators, it was understood, would prepare the young morally and physically for adult life and guide their years in school. It was also hoped that music, art, sports, and vocational activities such as home economics and wood shop, which were parts of the growing curriculum in public schools of the 1950's, would inspire them. For the most part, public schools provided the "Baby Boomer" generation with an experience which today is viewed as somewhat idyllic, the "Leave It To Beaver", "Ozzie and Harriet" model. Certainly there were problems in the higher grades with truancy, covert smoking in the bathrooms, and teen pregnancy, but these were considered mostly to be unfortunate but manageable incidents by "juvenile delinquents" and disadvantaged inner-city teenagers.

As we begin the Twenty-First Century public schools have become dangerous places, and not just high schools. Children as young as ten and eleven have brought the system to its knees by shooting down their teachers and fellow students on campus. No one is talking about "juvenile delinquency" anymore. We are hearing and talking about lethal incidents of juvenile violence among all social classes and races, suburban and inner city youth alike. Youth, gangs and drugs have spread to every corner of our society. Many of our junior and senior high schools have metal detectors set up in the hallways. Nevertheless, it is estimated that 28% of boys in America come to school every day armed with guns, knives, and other dangerous instruments for their own protection. (Garbarino, 1999).

On October 1, 1997 Luke Woodham, a 16-year-old in Pearl, Mississippi killed his mother, then took his gun to school. The result was three students dead and seven wounded. Several months later on December 1, 1997 Michael Carneal showed up at a high school prayer meeting in his hometown of West Paducah, Kentucky and killed three youngsters. On March 24, 1998 in Jonesboro, Arkansas two young boys, 11-year-old Andrew Golden and 13- year-old Mitchell Johnson shot four schoolmates and a teacher to death when they opened fire at a school. What should have been a joyous evening, a school dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania on April 24, 1998, went horribly wrong when 14-year-old Andrew Wurst shot a teacher to death in front of his classmates. In Springfield, Oregon on May 21, 1998, Kip Kinkel, then 15 years old, shot his parents to death. He then went to school and gunned down 24 schoolmates, killing two of them, in the school cafeteria (Garbarino, 1999). And so it goes. Fear of lethal violence in school has become a way of life for our kids.

Gun control advocates point to the ready availability of guns as the primary cause of our problems. It is estimated that there are currently 192 million guns in the hands of the American public (Herbert, 1999). Certainly, guns make anger more lethal. There could never have been murder on so grand a scale as the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999 had there been only knives or baseball bats available. There has always, however, been a plethora of guns in America since the earliest pioneering days, numbers which remained consistently high through a revolution, a civil war, westward expansion and several major depressions. Still, violence in American schools was almost nil. Why are our kids picking up guns now and turning them against their families, teachers, and peers?

This paper is a discussion of various issues surrounding school violence and its implications for our children. Our focus is to:
1. Determine the root causes of extreme violence and how these have developed contextually in our rapidly changing society.
2. Understand and clarify who is most at risk for such behaviors.
3. Discover whether such situations develop in a manner that is observable and therefore preventable.
4. Describe special considerations regarding school conflicts and violence.
5. Assess which mediation skills and sensitivities are required to meet these needs, beyond well-established peer and playground mediation approaches utilizing innovative processes which create a collaboration between educators, psychologists, administrators, health care professionals, and specially trained mediators in the service of our children.
6. Discuss use of TAGS technology as a tool to battle school violence through mediation practice.

I       <u>What Are the Root Causes of Contemporary School Violence?</u>

In order to examine the growth of campus violence from the somewhat minor behavioral infractions of the l950's to the lethality which has been progressing at an alarming rate since then and has literally exploded during the 1990's we will utilize certain well-accepted psychological frameworks.  There are two that are particularly suited to our discussion, Existential Psychology and Attachment Theory.

Existential Psychology is a branch of psychology which puts forth as its basic premise the belief that most psychopathology stems from four fears, loss, chaos, isolation, and death.  It is a helpful model when referencing the sociological debits and turmoil so many youngsters face every day.  Another branch of psychology whose philosophical construct creates an easily understood and concrete means of clarifying the experiences of childhood and adolescence is Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1979), which outlines the developmental needs of children in relation to the type and degree of parental attachment. These are directly related to parental responsiveness to the child's cues since infancy and throughout childhood, and defines a spectrum of developmental outcomes ranging from the optimum relationship, secure attachment, to the resulting problems created by insecure attachment or anxious/avoidant attachment. We shall refer to these models as we discuss each area of sociological disturbance among contemporary school children.

<u>A.  Changes In the Educational System: The Junior High/Middle School Model Emerges</u>

Let us examine, first of all, how the educational system in this country has changed since World War II. Children who attended American public schools prior to 1950 were taught by one teacher for an entire nine-month "year" from kindergarten through eighth grade in classrooms designed for 20 to 25 children at most.  This gave each child an opportunity to bond with his or her teacher and classmates, and created an atmosphere that was both nurturing and familiar.  Furthermore, the teacher was able to observe and interact with each child, often providing not only positive role modeling, but the reflection, interest, and caring which might be less than adequate at home.  This was a good example of positive attachment reinforcement during crucial developmental periods for children ages 5 through 12.  Freud considered these the years of sexual latency, and by keeping children in this nurturing educational model during the latency phase of development childhood was protected and somewhat lengthened.

The mid to late 1950's brought a revolutionary idea into American education, the Junior High/Middle School model.  Educators were looking for a way to deal with the burgeoning post-war baby boom. Rather than constructing many more grammar schools and high schools per district only one large junior high school or middle school could be erected and then shared by several districts, thus spreading the burdensome costs of building and maintenance over a larger economic base.

In this new educational model grammar schools abruptly ends for children at fifth or sixth grade, and sixth or seventh through ninth graders are redirected to large, impersonal schools, often combined with students from other districts, a virtual sea of strange faces.  This is supposedly a way to handle not only the rapidly expanding school population but is sold to parents as a superior means of preparing children for the transition to high school.  This is still the way public education is being handled, and, although it may seem reasonable enough when administrators and school board members look at the numbers in terms of cost-effectiveness, it is a risky proposition for children.

Currently, children as young as 11 are being shuffled from classroom to classroom, teacher to teacher, subject to subject in a confusing and isolating rotation for which they are often unprepared and immature. No longer is there the safe environment of a single classroom and a single, observant teacher.  Children are now changing classrooms every 45-50 minutes in what mimics the scatter formation some college bands use during football half time shows.  Roll is taken 6 to 8 times per day also, allowing far less time in these 45-50 minute classes to devote to the subjects each teacher must cover, let alone providing time to interact with and observe individual children.

Junior High/Middle School is where the child first encounters other children and adolescents moving about for the most part unsupervised in hallways and stairwells, opportunities ripe for bullying, pushing, lunch-money shakedowns, and general confusion.  These lesser types of violence, once established in a school, become the breeding ground for the rage-driven incidents that we read about with horror in our daily newspapers.

The type of bonding between classmates which allows for the blossoming of friendships also becomes substantially more difficult in junior highs and middle schools, as the makeup of classes mix and match students in various and random scheduling patterns as many as six to eight times per day.   Add to this the larger size of the building or campus, introduction of hall lockers, huge cafeterias, gym locker rooms and showers, unsupervised bathrooms, and an unfortunate crossing of the developmental stages of childhood which places younger children at the mercy of older, more powerful, more sexually aware, and occasionally predatory individuals, and we have all the elements necessary for the growth of those fears about which existential psychology speaks, fear of chaos and fear of isolation.

Some children may have the natural resilience and excellent familial support that allows them to handle such situations.  Some hardy psyches may even thrive, but what of those children who already have a tenuous attachment to parents and others?  Gangs seem to provide the illusion that there is safety in numbers.  Drugs make the unbearable seem bearable to lonely, frightened kids, at least for a time.  Academic chaos is often the first step in the loss of a secure societal attachment, a foundation which might have been theirs had they been in a safer, more connective and reinforcing model.

B. Busing and The Erosion of Neighborhood Schools

The 1960's brought Civil Rights into the forefront of American political thought and action.  Nowhere has this become more apparent than in public schools.  Busing students from one school district to another in order to achieve some modicum of racial parity has even grammar school children as young as 5 leaving the familiarity of their neighborhoods and heading off to schools many miles from home.

As recently as January 25, 2002 the New York Times published an article by Anemona Hartocollis about a decision to bus approximately 700 black and Hispanic children from their neighborhoods to unfamiliar schools far from their homes in order to create a more racially balanced school in the Bronx.  In return, 350 youngsters of junior high and high school age will be forced to take public transportation to a converted synagogue across town.  The 350 kindergartners and first graders who are being evicted from this site will now have to take school buses to a location over two miles away, "a time-consuming trip with no easy subway access for parents to attend meetings or pick up sick children."

Busing makes after-school playground friendships difficult, if not impossible, to establish, since children are being herded onto buses and sent in many different directions.  Friendships do not, after all, develop in well-regulated classrooms, but in that precious time after school and on weekends in which children are free to choose their playmates and develop their individual and group interests.  Children today are often sent to schools far from their own siblings, alienated from children who live on their own street, arriving home as much as an hour later and leaving their beds an hour earlier than they would have had they remained in their neighborhood schools.  In cases of medical emergencies parents are also far away.  This becomes especially difficult for low-income families who have no car or no driver.  Thus, an ailing child may be forced to wait hours without the comfort of a parent or the necessary parental consent for emergency medical treatment, a particularly troubling element of this system.

Those children who are already struggling with attachment issues are further emotionally shaken from the fragile nest of safety created by home and neighborhood, ripe for attachment-seeking behaviors such as gangs, and the numbing-out or temporary sense of euphoria and control produced by drugs and alcohol.  What was hailed as a means of promoting diversity has become, for many youngsters, the first step toward feelings of isolation, the withering of the connectedness to family, friends and community which remains the foundation for a child's emotional growth and health, and an unintentional thrust toward anti-social, self-destructive behaviors.

3.  The Evaporating Role of Parents

Today our society is facing extraordinarily high divorce rates, an economic climate and tax structure which encourages, and often necessitates, families with two working parents, and swelling unemployment and welfare rolls.  We are experiencing more out-of-wedlock births per capita than ever before in upper and middle classes of society, a condition which was once considered primarily a problem among poor, teen, and minority populations.  Even when an older, professional woman decides to have a baby and raise the child alone that child comes into the world already minus one parent, a male role model, an important source of love and attachment.  Single parent families may be able to succeed financially, but they are

missing the psychological wholeness in terms of male responsiveness to the child and active male modeling which fathers are meant by nature to provide.

Attorney General's offices in every state report that non-payment of child support has reached epidemic proportions. The enormous job of collecting these funds and the tracking down of disappearing parents, mostly fathers, has left every state agency responsible for child support hopelessly back-logged, inundated with requests by desperate custodial parents on behalf of needy and abandoned children.

It isn't poverty, *per se*, which leads to the erosion of a youngster's self-esteem, but parental neglect, emotional unresponsiveness, and abandonment. If we are faced with an epidemic of parental flight from responsibility, are we not, therefore, creating tremendous numbers of children who feel worthless and hopeless based on failure of the parent/child relationship? Children, after all, see themselves and judge their worth based primarily on the way they feel they are perceived by their parents. Our young people are suffering from depression and suicide in record numbers. Indeed, many of the school shoot-outs, which have led to such dire consequences, have been murder-suicides committed by depressed and angry young men. It is time to look seriously at the family issues at the heart of these horrific examples of self-destruction.

"Latch-key kids", those children who come home from school each day to an empty house and spend many hours per week unsupervised, are at risk for all sorts of problems relating to isolation and unintentional neglect such as gangs, alcohol, and drugs, but so are children whose parents are simply too exhausted by their own work schedules to spend adequate time with their offspring and be responsive to their emotional needs. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine High School seniors responsible for killing 23 students and teachers, wounding at least 20 others, and killing themselves in what has become the deadliest school massacre in American history, both came from middle-class, two-parent families. Each family consisted of two parents who worked full-time, however, in order to afford the life-style which allowed them to own large homes, and made it possible for the Klebold family to own seven cars, including four BMW's. Harris and Klebold had kept what amounted to large arsenals of semi-automatic weapons and enough bomb-making materials to blow up an entire town in plain sight in their bedrooms, but neither family ever checked up on what these young men were doing under their own roofs. Bear in mind that they had, only 11 weeks before the massacre, been released by a juvenile diversion program because they had already been involved in anti-social behavior and lesser crimes. Why weren't their parents behaving in ways consistent with these very recent actions such as monitoring their sons' activities, checking their rooms for drugs or anything related to past behaviors, and engaging them in on-going discussions relating to their emotional recovery from such potentially dangerous problems? Was there no point in which sheets were changed, laundry was carried in, floors were mopped, or were these boys permitted to live in virtual isolation with only their computers for companionship?

When children are left to fend for themselves physically or emotionally their sense of isolation and avoidance grows. Children, in order to retain a healthy sense of self, need to feel attached in some way to the world around them, especially if their parents have failed to bond with them in a caring way. Sometimes a child's emotional salvation can be an alert teacher or loving grandparent who bridges the gap. Until recently families generally consisted of parents, children, and grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins living nearby or even under the same roof. Today families often relegate the elderly to senior complexes and old-age homes, upwardly mobile couples transplant their young families to distant suburbs, or divorce separates children from the cohesion of an extended family structure. Isolated, insecurely attached youngsters who have no caring adult parental substitute may find refuge in various self-soothing activities, among which alcohol, drugs, sex, and gangs often figure prominently. So do television, video games, and computers, the pastimes of isolation and loneliness, the babysitters and role model purveyors of modern times.

C. Media:  Television, Motion Pictures, and Video Games

1.  The Television Industry

Television during the 1950's was rife with educational, uplifting, family-oriented programming. The networks soon discovered, however, that such thought-provoking fare encouraged families to turn off their sets and actually discuss what had been viewed. This was no way to make money, as sponsors only made money if the public was *glued to the tube.*

"Enter The Untouchables and Gunsmoke. These violent, action-packed shows immediately captivated adult viewers. Motivated by the urgent need to try something very different, networks stumbled upon the "violence formula." This formula assumes that the more graphic and gratuitous the violence, the more viewers will watch. It works fairly well until levels of violence in real life become comparable to what's on the screen. Then the novelty wears. And the violence levels need to be increased," (Grossman and DeGaetano, 1999).

Experts in sociology, psychology and medicine, indeed the Surgeon General himself, have believed since the late 1960's that television violence has had a tremendously negative effect on young viewers. There are literally thousands of research studies which substantiate this belief and which document the causal effect of television violence on society as a whole. There are only 13 such studies out of approximately 2,500 which question the relationship between television violence and youthful aggression, and 12 out of those 13 have been done by the television networks themselves (Grossman and DeGaetano, 1999).

The largest study of television content ever conducted was paid for by The National Cable Television Association and was administered by Mediascope, Inc., in association with the Universities of California, North Carolina, and Texas. The researchers who developed this comprehensive project not only counted the number and types of violent acts, but they developed nine contextual features of measurement for degree of harmfulness to children. Violence, it was determined, poses a far greater risk if it is repeated using a conventional weapon, if it is put into a humorous context, or if it is morally justified in some way.

Second and third year summaries of this study were released in 1997 and 1998, pointing out trends which served to reinforce the project's earlier findings. For example, it was estimated that children who watch two hours of cartoons each day are exposed to at least 500 high-risk portrayals of violence per year, teaching them aggressive behavior and reinforcing those behaviors with humor. Also, as many as one-third of all violent programs feature evil characters who are never punished. Almost 40 percent of violent incidents on television programs are initiated by characters who possess the very qualities that make them attractive role models (Grossman and DeGaetano, 1999).

Over half of the violent incidents portrayed on television, according to the NCTA study, would result in lethal or incapacitating injuries if they occurred in real life. How are children, who are developmentally defined by their belief in the same sort of "magical thinking" which makes Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny part of their childhood, supposed to differentiate between television violence and the consequences of violence in the real world? Parents may delude themselves into thinking that children know the difference, but time and again we have learned that, indeed, they do not.

Last year newspapers reported that a developmentally slow eleven-year-old boy living with his mother in Florida killed a six-year-old girl for whom his mother was babysitting by choking her to death with a wrestling hold he had seen many times on television. All of the wrestling programs he'd been watching for many hours a day without parental supervision or discussion repeatedly showed large, healthy men getting up from the mat after having been slammed, punched, kicked, and choked by other large, healthy men. They seemed, to his child's limited understanding, impervious to harm. Many adults in this country are unwilling to accept and believe that most, if not all, of professional wrestling is cleverly orchestrated, or "fixed". Are we really surprised to learn that a child with learning disabilities expected another child to simply jump up and walk away after being subjected to the popular "wrestling moves" he'd learned on TV?

While children may not understand the consequences of what they see acted out, they are still eager to imitate all sorts of violent behaviors. Imitation and repetition are how children learn, so why are we surprised to discover that they are far more likely to develop aggressive fantasies based on their viewing habits?

Children in the 1950's often play-acted adult occupational roles such as doctor, postman, teacher, nurse, fireman, or truck driver. They also played "Cowboys and Indians", soldiers, and emulated the heroics of Peter Pan and Davy Crockett. Violence was more frequently implied onscreen than graphically portrayed, and even then parents were concerned enough about content to limit their off-springs' TV watching and to impose stricter bedtimes, thus avoiding the more adult programming which was offered later in the evening. The rubber knives and plastic six-shooters of the 1950's were clearly toys, not capable of teaching weapons handling. Adventure play was supplemented with a hefty dose of imaginary

role-play inspired by reading, and by the emulation of other children singing, dancing, and acting in shows such as "The Mouseketeers".

Today's children seem to have lost interest in imitating living, breathing role models. No longer do the majority of children play at being doctors, teachers, or other children, but instead emulate the violent action heroes they spend hours and hours watching each day, such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and the vicious characters sold and licensed by the World Wrestling Federation as "bone-crunching action figures." Later bedtimes, the enormous numbers of violent shows available on television today because of network, cable, and satellite offerings, and a greater degree of technological babysitting has allowed younger and younger audiences to view late-night or adult programming. Television has narrowed our children's' interests by over-stimulating them while desensitizing them to brutality.

## 2. Motion Pictures

Motion pictures currently share a rating system which gives a PG-13 rating (Parental Guidance Suggested for Children 13 and Under) to films which have far more gratuitous violence than most parents and experts in child psychology interviewed by researchers find comfortable. One of the more popular and benign movies of the 1990's, PG-rated Dick Tracy, had a higher body count, with a mere 14 killings, than the original 1974 Death Wish, which was considered, at the time of its release, to be a particularly violent film (Grossman De Gaetano, 1999). The American public, especially our young people, has been systematically desensitized to escalating levels of violence. Thus, the "violence formula" we mentioned earlier has led to a quantum leap in the acceptable levels of cinematic as well as television violence. Our PG-13 rating in 2002 is the equivalent of an R-rating only 30 years ago.

Ratings systems are only as effective as the rate of compliance by parents, movie theater owners, television networks, and the people who rent and sell videos. It has been remarkably easy for children and adolescents to buy or rent R-rated films, to watch them on cable television or dish satellite networks, and even to get into theaters whose management is conveniently lax about checking IDs. We now know that by the time a typical American child turns eighteen he or she will have seen at least 200,000 dramatized acts of violence and over 40,000 murders onscreen.

Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a Harvard Medical School professor of psychiatry asserts that the "abuse" a child sustains by being exposed to violent media images is equivalent to the emotional abuse sustained by sexual or physical abuse, or even living in a war zone. Why are we so generally unconcerned about permitting our children to see things we would never want them subjected to in real life? How can we delude ourselves into thinking that being bombarded daily, year after year, with increasing levels of violence will not somehow alter the perceptions of young, impressionable viewers?

When children see violence repeated systematically they sometimes tend to override their own fears of being subjected to it by "identifying with the aggressor." This is why so many abused children grow up to be abusers themselves. Thus, a child who may originally be terrified by a character such as "Freddy Kreuger" or the demonic puppet "Chuckie" will self-soothe by pretending to actually be this horrific monster, acting out against others in his violent fantasies as a way of re-establishing self-control. Adults tend to be angry with the self-soothing child rather than asking why the child has had to resort to an aggressive stance in the first place. Sometimes children's aggression is unconsciously forged by their fragile psyches as a defense mechanism for surviving mental trauma for which they are truly unprepared. So why are children being permitted to view such extreme violence, horror, brutality, and mutilation over and over again when the outcome has been so overwhelmingly negative? The majority of research studies which have posed this question suggest that adults, themselves desensitized by years of onscreen violence, and unwilling to be inconvenienced by giving up technological "babysitters", are content to live in denial.

## 3. Video Games

Video games are the direct descendants of pinball, the light-flashing, bell-ringing, glass-topped, lever-flipping games of the 1950's. Very few families were able to afford a pinball game of their own, as these large contraptions were costly to buy and expensive to maintain, so pinball games were generally limited to arcades, burger joints, neighborhood bars, and pool halls. Kids loved them when they could get their hands on them, but they were played primarily by teenagers and adults who frequented locations in which

pinball machines were placed and had the money it took to operate them. They were built for adults, too, high and heavy, decorated with sexy images of scantily-clad women and muscle-bound heroes to attract older teenagers and grown men, their biggest market.

As computer technology advanced, electronic computer games began to displace the manually operated, far slower pinball machines. The 1970's brought Pac-Man, Super Mario Brothers, and Pong. These games not only moved faster, but they required little or no physical strength to operate. Younger and younger children were suddenly thronging to the arcades to play the newest versions available, and the games were updated every six months to retain the players' interest. The manufacturers immediately noticed that boys far outweighed girls in interest, hours of play, and addiction to the rising levels of play. Ms. Pac-Man was introduced in order to entice young females, but this met with minimal success. Car racing games were added, flight simulators and mazes were tried, but it became apparent that the more violence levels increased the more boys enjoyed playing the games.

As computer graphics became more sophisticated the video games became amazingly realistic. By the end of the 1980's the "joystick" by which players moved the action around the screen was being replaced by "point and shoot" simulated guns which looked and handled remarkably like the real thing. Clever manufacturers soon realized that they could link these video games to home television screens, and suddenly every family that owned a TV became a potential video arcade. The same proved true with home computers.

Children all over America were begging for computer games, Playstation, and Nintendo. Parents and professionals noticed that children who played for any length of time were becoming increasingly intense and aggressive, their adrenaline was pumping wildly, and their behavior was more and more anti-social, especially whenever they were asked to stop playing and return to the real world.

At the point of true addiction the line between reality and fantasy blurs. Just as the adult gambler who knows, in his fully conscious state, that he has a financial limit bets money he doesn't even have while in the throes of high-stakes play, so are children apt to lose themselves and their sense of right and wrong when the action pulls them in and rewards them for "kills." They're on an incredible high, a frenzy of technologically-induced mania, which replaces imagination with stimulation, creates feelings of omnipotence, desensitizes them to human death and brutality, and makes them as insatiable for this reinforced high as any addict.

Along with the addiction comes the realistic training to shoot and kill. The military uses the very same simulated games with very little alteration to teach recruits how to kill in the field and to desensitize them to murdering other human beings. When 14-year-old Michael Carneal shot up a high school prayer meeting in Paducah he only fired eight shots. He calmly made eight direct hits on eight different children, five to the head and three to the upper torso. According to the FBI the average experienced law officer only makes one hit in five at an average range of seven yards. This was Michael Carneal's first try with a real gun, but he had been trained well by hundreds of hours of point-and-shoot video games, shooting with deadly accuracy at anything that moved.

## 4. Computers

Computers have become the social connection center for kids today. The Internet has replaced libraries, telephones, and the need for face-too-face communication with peers. There are web sites that will teach kids how to make a bomb, plan a killing spree, and which will connect them to countless cult, survivalist, Satanic, neo-fascist and ultra-violent web sites.

A major link between the young killers who have terrorized American schools since 1990 is the experience of hundreds and hundreds of hours spent alone on their computers learning exactly how to spread chaos and death. Their computers were the companions they turned to in their loneliness and isolation. Sometimes a few lost boys would find each other on the Net and make their plans together, most often for a murder/suicide at school. Sometimes they used their computers to send hate messages and warnings to other students, reinforcing their sense of power through faceless intimidation. Technology has provided a way for the young to avoid face-to-face social interaction, the very thing that teaches the important life lessons of compassion, patience, responsibility for others, courage, understanding, and true affection. In many cases is it has replaced sports, clubs, and educational

organizations in the life of adolescents while reducing real, living people and animals to distant, discardable objects.

The Internet can easily be utilized to provide a constant source of negative information, further alienating youngsters with attachment problems from their parents, teachers, and peers, showing them graphically via sophisticated killing games how to obtain the sense of control and mastery they hunger to reproduce in real life. The enormous escalation of violence from addictive fantasies of death to the killing of real human beings becomes, to their systematically desensitized adolescent brains, a logical extension of the anti-social play to which they have devoted literally hundreds of hours. Even the military cannot provide the kind of time and training to its eighteen-year-old recruits that the average American adolescent has readily available, spent in the privacy of his own room, learning to aim and fire with deadly accuracy at anything that moves.

## 5. Gangs, Alcohol, and Drugs

So much has been written on the escalation of gang and drug culture, the correlation between these negative forces and violence, that we will mention this obvious relational problem but briefly. Certainly, the longing to belong, to attach to something, has pushed many youngsters, male and female at this point, into gangs. Drugs are everywhere today. Children encounter them at school on a daily basis. Still, the very reasons which make gangs, alcohol, and drugs attractive and viable to kids are the same reasons which move them to pick up guns: many of our children and adolescents have become fearful, emotionally neglected, pushed into educational systems for which they are ill-prepared and immature, isolated from family and peers by technological addictions which function as babysitters and companions. Their imaginations have been systematically dismantled and replaced by artificial stimulation. At- risk youngsters often seek attachment of any sort, appropriate or not, numb out or get high from drugs, or seek a sense of omnipotence from gang activities, weapons ownership, and mastery of violent games in order to fill a psychological void in themselves, their existential fear of chaos and isolation.

## II. Identifying Who Is Most At Risk for Violent Behavior

When we discuss potential, lethal violence, gender surfaces as a major indicator. The difference between how boys and girls deal with loss, hurt, rage and loneliness seems to be hard-wired in some instances and sociologically created and reinforced in others.

Girls in emotional pain often turn to others for comfort. Sometimes they will seek help from or connection with a guidance counselor, girlfriends, a parent, or teachers. When these healthy lines of communication aren't available for whatever reason, girls may become promiscuous in an attempt to emotionally attach and find comfort. More recently lonely girls have turned to their home computers, spending hours in chat rooms talking to virtual strangers, often forming age-inappropriate cyber-relationships with people who may or may not resemble the warm, caring individuals they pretend to be. Unfortunately, girls today are also joining gangs in higher numbers than ever before.

Females also tend to ingest their pain, turning it on themselves in the form of eating disorders, headaches, stomachaches, depression, and anxiety. They obsess about their feelings and the feelings of others rather than turn away from them. When these feelings become overwhelming they may turn to drugs, sex or alcohol in an effort to self-soothe, but they generally internalize their pain in ways which do not directly harm others.

Boys, on the other hand, learn early to deny their feelings. There is still a predominant belief in this country that men don't show emotions if possible. Manliness is defined by the ability to withstand pain, exact revenge when disrespected, and to dominate others. This is especially true in the South, with its strong history of masculine honor and revenge, and in Latino cultures, where machismo is a learned attribute. It seems, however, that boys throughout our culture are prone to either numbing out negative feelings, sometimes with drugs and alcohol, or to externalizing their feelings by acting out violently against others and/or themselves in an attempt to hide the truth of their emotional vulnerability. When

boys engage in sex during adolescence it is less about self-soothing attachment than about dominance and control.

When adolescents suffer from depression they often turn their violence against themselves in the form of suicide. Youth suicide rates have risen 400 percent since 1950. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Survey in 1997 reports that 15 percent of high school boys seriously considered suicide, 12 percent of boys made a suicide plan and 5 percent attempted suicide. The CDC also reports that, although girls are more likely to contemplate suicide, boys are far more likely to follow through. Girls most often use pills. Boys use guns (Garberino, 1999).

How does this impact school violence? The number of incidents resulting in lethal violence reported since 1984 have all been perpetrated by young, depressed males with guns, and almost all of these attacks were planned murder/suicides. Because boys are sociologically conditioned to be uncomfortable with their feelings, they often refuse to acknowledge the underlying emotional pain of grief, frustration, disappointment, loss, loneliness, fear of failure, sadness, and anxiety. It is far easier to displace their feelings by projecting them onto others, covering these deeper feelings with anger, an emotion which is resorted to more often by immature individuals unable to confront the truth of their situations with insight, patience, and self-honesty. Anger is thus used more as a defense mechanism against painful insight than as a true emotion. Angry, unconsciously directed young men resorting to externalization when their self-esteem is bruised can become lethally dangerous to those around them.

The young men involved in school violence are, more often than not, referred to as "loners." Existential psychology tells us that fear of isolation is one of the root causes of psychopathology. Boys who have become isolated from family and peers to the extent that they spend most of their free time with a computer for companionship have little in the way of emotional support to see them through the usual crises of youth. It takes a strong, caring relationship with someone mature enough to contain the child's anxiety to counterbalance the everyday slights, hurts, and misperceptions, which arise throughout the school years. Also, children need continual positive reinforcement as to their basic goodness and worthiness.

Parents and teachers often fail to realize that they may be creating Oppositional Defiant Disorder in the child by constant criticism and negative feedback. The DSM-IV ("Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition") defines the essential feature of Oppositional Defiant Disorder as "a recurrent pattern of negativistic, defiant, disobedient, and hostile behavior toward authority figures." These are the children who are often described as "sweet but underachieving", who cannot seem to do the very thing which is in their own best interests, who don't understand themselves why they find it impossible to complete a task, and who consistently fail to please their parents. They have become their parents' self-fulfilling prophecy of a "problem child."

Studies have shown that boys in particular are far more criticized in school and at home than girls. This may be related to a somewhat higher incidence of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Tourette's Syndrome among young males, conditions that can be extremely disruptive in the family and in the classroom. Frustrated teachers, faced with short classroom periods, large numbers of students per class, and the demands of administration are often unable or unwilling to connect on a meaningful level with a student who suffers from a learning disability, a short attention span, or hyperactivity. Such children may be repeatedly singled out for punishment, public humiliation, and isolation from their peers. This usually results in exclusion from meaningful positive social interaction on the playground or in the cafeteria, the stigma of alienation reinforced by other children every day. Children viewed as strange or "nerdy" by their peers often become the targets of bullies, are excluded from forming schoolyard friendships, are not accepted and appreciated for the abilities they may actually possess. They face myriad rejections that make school unbearable for them. Teachers and administrators have historically maintained a woeful track record of positive intervention on behalf of lonely or bullied children, relying on the "boys will be boys" maxim, or "let them sort it out for themselves", thereby exempting themselves from their inherent responsibility as adults *in loco parents.*

Parents of learning disabled or troubled children may not be able to separate their children's deficits from their own egos, becoming disgusted or enraged by academic underachievement and reports of unsatisfactory classroom behavior. The mother and father may have had early difficulties establishing a warm, mutually responsive relationship with the child since infancy. Rather than emphasizing the positive attributes of the child and attempting to bolster the child's flagging sense of self, they may in turn

resort to constant criticism or rejection.  Parents who focus on only the bad behavior and ignore the inherent good in their child are generally believed to be the primary cause of Oppositional Defiant Disorder in children.  Over time, the child may develop Anti-Social Personality Disorder, a much more difficult syndrome to treat, and a precursor to juvenile and adult crime.

Parental ambivalence between love and resentment may also lead to children who suffer from "anxious/avoidant attachment" (Bowlby, 1999).  The anxious/avoidant child cannot attach securely to parental ambivalence, and soon learns to reject his parents before they can further reject him.  Ultimately, the isolated, insecurely attached or anxious/avoidantly attached child withdraws to the safety of his technological companions, the television, video games, and his computer.  Anger is his first line of defense, and revenge is often not far behind.  He has plenty of time to smolder in his room, practicing point-and-shoot games until he develops deadly accuracy, checking out Internet sights which support the kind of lethality about which he fantasizes, and perhaps even meeting with another lonely, angry, isolated individual by cyber-chat in order to gather courage and support for his plans.

III.  Observing and Preventing School Violence

What can we discern about who is at risk for violent behavior?  We know that young males who are alienated from their peers and families, who have the types of learning disabilities or differences from others which target them for ridicule at school, who spend hours watching and participating in technological violence, who are suffering from depression and possibly suicidality, who have insecure or anxious avoidant attachment problems with their parents, are openly envious or bigoted, are high on the list of those in need of attention.  If we add the incidence of major life changes, such as divorce, death of parent or sibling, a continuing pattern of family relocation, access to guns, and untreated emotional problems the focus narrows.

How can we recognize these individuals?  Many of the young shooters involved in school violence threatened suicide and/or violence to their peers.  Sometimes students and concerned parents reported it to disinterested school administrators.  Many other times it wasn't taken seriously by anyone, or concerned students feared becoming targets themselves if it were learned that they had reported such information.

It is important to remember that all threats of violence and suicide should be taken seriously, that they are often far more than a cry for attention.  Most suicidal children and adults verbalize their obsession with death days, and even weeks, before attempting the act.  So, too, have young killers often talked openly about their angst and their predilection for violence.  Unfortunately, they have too often been ignored.

 How can we create a safe method of reporting threats of violence and suspicions of suicidality which can be utilized 24 hours a day by students, parents, teachers, administrators, and which will encourage self-reporting by alienated, at-risk individuals?

Special Considerations Regarding School Conflicts and Violence

Identifying the wide array of social and psychological root causes surrounding school violence provides a chilling, but necessary, first step in addressing this growing national disaster that robs children of their very foundation and diminishes society's most vital resource - our future generation's full potential.  Studies, task forces, and inquiries have been established, especially post -Columbine, for schools, school systems, cities, counties, states, and special training teams to share their techniques and approaches in dealing with violence, preparation, prevention and response.  School boards and teaching/education unions have each participated in numerous conferences to enlarge safety standards and strategies to address this new fact of educational life.  In addition, for decades, with varying degrees of success, schoolyard and peer mediation programs have been underway and supported by dedicated school-appointed counselors, teachers and advisors.  And, although they should certainly be maintained, and increased, there are several inherent problems that the very limited mediation approaches utilized to date cannot shake.

Schoolyard or peer mediation approaches have a long success record for dealing with relatively mundane day-to-day problems and conflicts that must be addressed to keep peace and harmony flowing on a

campus. However, there is a quantum difference in danger, complexity, and long-lasting impact when one goes beyond the typical conflicts over the use of resources, hurt feelings around social fairness, the occasional shoving match, or even fisticuffs, and the premeditated revenge strategies now resulting in extreme violence and mortality, that eclipse the use of peer mediation as a technique to quell these potential firestorms. Peer mediation, at its inception, was never intended to deal with automatic, indiscriminant rifle fire, actual bomb placements in schools, or murder/suicide pacts that are actually taking place.

There is no single comprehensive approach to mitigating these problems. Certainly no one set of skills is a panacea to these psychological and social horrors. But an early warning system is a must, as is the necessity of communicating in a manner that will have a likelihood of being received, if only as a starting point. A mediation approach that provides resources beyond the typical schoolyard stratagem is one step in that direction.

One of the obvious problems regarding peer mediation programs is their reliance on the limited mediation skills of the student population. It is common sense to believe that acceptability among peers may be high, and that is an authentic benefit. But the very nature of students mediating with other students necessitates that the experience level, and consequently the expertise provided, is relatively low. Except in rare instances, those individuals actually performing mediation services are doing so with limited training, education, and practice in this area; more so if peer mediation programs are in the vanguard of the effort in a particular community. In addition, very few training experiences are continuously maintained over time with continuous education upgraded and provided to the mediators in the campus setting. Thus, the newest techniques and variety of approaches are consequently not integrated into the schools' programs.

A system that combines a multitude of mediation services relying upon greater experience, continuous education, collaboration with mental health professionals, and other psychological services and support is much preferred to deal with the multitude, complex levels, and varied problems that foster school violence as described earlier when detailing the psychological constructs that give way to these aberrations. There are additional peer usage limitations that innovative approaches in mediation, and specific technologies to be described below, can address as well.

Unlike other kinds of mediation services, such as court-appointed, employment, commercial, labor, family, regulatory, statutory, or others, not only is the confidentiality of the content of the actual mediation of importance in a school situation, but in this environment the initial act of even the problem sharing itself must be addressed for this type of conflict response to be effective. Students who may be at risk, either those who are victimized by real and potential violence, or those who may perpetrate it, often yearn for the anonymity and additional security not afforded by even the most careful, traditional mediation approaches that would naturally include confidentiality.

Vulnerable students, as described in the problems section above, may require additional security for any kind of dialogue even to begin. Being known within the student community, especially as someone who is dealing with conflict that has led to a situation of violence, may be naturally abhorrent to the very persons who need help and assistance the most. They would additionally fear this standing-out and being seen as a pariah by their classmates and friends because their very personal angst has been publicized through a formal process.

Causes discussed earlier, as described by the existential psychology construct, including elements of loss, chaos, isolation, and even death, demand aid that relies upon a long-term, nurturing relationship. This is not something inherent in peer or schoolyard mediation as it is customarily practiced, especially when one realizes that these systems rely upon populations that by their very nature are short-lived, typically the length of years school mediators reside at an institution. The inclusions of the professionals involved, teachers, administrators and counselors, are not of any greater assistance in this instance. They are often in much more of an advisory or supervisory role than acting as front line mediators. And, by virtue of their daily activity on a campus, are too well-known for the anonymity often required by those in most need or fear.

Attachment theory, also described above, likewise looks to the developmental needs that the current quick-fix and closure that labor, employment, commercial, or even family mediation brings to these situations is not capable of providing. What is required to be beneficial in approaching these problems is

a model that permits trained professionals to become aware, build a collaborative team, assess situations, break through to those who may be seeking help, and utilizing some communication medium comfortable to the user, all of which can lead to the first steps in the replacement of a secure foundation that will be reinforced over time. An individual relationship, one-on- one with a therapist who has been trained to be non-judgmental is simply the most important aspect to the emotional well-being of the students.

If one pictures the uses for mediation as it is practiced today in nearly all of its possible forums, whether it is in the academic world, business, or personal relationships, one views an approach to problem-solving that is reactive.  Mediation, as a voluntary process, relies upon parties coming together to deal with a pre-existing condition that has escalated to a point verging on some type of rights or power-based solution. Regardless of how that is played out, in courts, politically, or through negotiations, in all of its forms it is still reactionary.

An educational environment that purports to be nurturing, safe, and open to emotional and intellectual exploration must be a safe harbor to be truly effective.  Preventive steps are the ideal when it comes to working through harmful conflict, even more so if the potential for violence is apparent.  What will be described in the "Technology Section" below includes a unique opportunity for dialogue, exploration, problem solving, conflict management, and an early warning system that is in fact, anonymous, continuous, integrative, and collaborative.   Thus, this will afford participants an opportunity to at least approach problems before they grow to a dangerous level.  Its procedures open pathways for safe reporting of incidents, gaining advice from specialists, and avenues for follow-up assistance.

By and large, mediation is either a solitary service to clients, or may operate in a joint approach, with perhaps one other mediator to share in the orchestration of the process, as in "co-mediating" a family, commercial, or employment/labor case.  Mediators, in tandem, may facilitate regulatory or statutory groups dealing with problems to solve.  The professional(s), adhering to ethical codes concerning neutrality and confidentiality needs may utilize the assistance of other mediators in complex cases.  As a rule mediators seldom, if ever, coordinate their skills with other societal and mental health service professionals such as social workers, psychologists, or counselors.  However, school settings are different.  School settings will require the combination of long-term care and deeply formed relationships to mitigate risk or prevent violence.  This collaboration may be exactly what is necessary in order to assist in alleviating threatening situations on campus or assessing particular risk.  This was referred to earlier when describing, in the existential psychology paradigm, fears of chaos, isolation, or loss.  Isolation, according to attachment theory, is one of the factors that may be a pre-curser to violence, and grows when ignored.

Mediation and Mediator Attributes and Characteristics

The questions, then, to be examined are the following:
1.   What are the mediator characteristics, traits, and attributes that can cut through the academic
   barriers that will serve to help avoid or respond to violence?
2. As there are special difficulties in dealing with school-related violence that customary mediation techniques by themselves will not answer, what technology is available that can be utilized to augment             successful mediator characteristics?
3. How should such technology be used to maximize opportunities for prevention and response to school violence?

To be effective, mediation in schools today must satisfactorily deal with violence and potentially life-threatening events.  To do that, mediation approaches must incorporate elements to deal with the problems described above.  New technologies yet to be examined below provide innovative avenues for mediation practitioners to travel, but certain constant attributes, characteristics, and traits must be maintained as well in order for mediation as a practice to be effective regardless of the innovative tools that could be made accessible.  Computerized technologies can take third party neutrals and compassionate communicators well beyond what has been thus far accomplished, but they can only augment, and not replace, what is essential in the mediation process.

Across the spectrum of practicing mediators one essential constant prevails, and that is that most mediators get better over time with experience and practice, at least until they reach a level of full competency. This is generally combined with formal education and theory, specific skills-training, a variety of cases, and familiarity with a wide array of conflict situations. Depending upon the forums in which they work mediators perform tasks that encompass an extensive list of activities that include, but are not limited to, the following duties:

.       Performing Administrative Functions
.       Information Gathering
.       Providing Information
.       Information Clarification and Relationship Management
.       Managing Mediation Environment and Process
.       Managing Mediation Process: Information Management
.       Managing Mediation Process: Expanding Information Pool
.       Caucusing
.       Emotional Support/Encouragement
.       Problem Solving
.       Developing Agreement
.       Finalizing
.       Clarification/Reality Check for Solution Possibilities
.       Subsequent Session(s): Follow-up

Mediator knowledge, likewise, goes well beyond specific tasks to perform, or even the specific content of the subject. This includes organizational, psychological and social underpinnings that contain, at a minimum, the following:

.       Personal Skills and Limitations
.       Ethical Issues
.       Alternatives to Mediation
.       Communication
.       Interpersonal Dynamics
.       Solution/Agreement Formation
.       Conflict
.       Theories of Social Change
.       Problems Solving Techniques
.       Cultural Issues
.       Mediation Models
.       Power and Control
.       (Ability) to Inform/Disseminate/Educate/Teach
.       Knowledge of Resources Outside of Mediation
.       How to Interact with Involved People other than Primary Participants

(Academy of Family Mediators: Voluntary Mediator Certification Project, 2000)

A SPIDR (Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution) study had similar findings to the Academy of Family Mediators' list above, identifying eight core skills necessary for effective mediation:

.       The ability to listen
.       The ability to analyze problems and frame issues
.       The ability to use clear, neutral language
.       The sensitivity to strongly held values
.       Presence and persistence
.       The ability to identify and separate the neutrals' personal values from issues under consideration
.       The ability to understand power imbalances
.       The ability to deal with complex facts

(SPIDR. 1989).

Seven different parameters of effective mediation have often been included in the research for professional organizations and states that have attempted to describe the effective or competent mediator utilizing a seminal study of mediator attributes by Christopher Honeyman. These include the following:

1. Investigation
    2. Empathy
    3.  Inventiveness and problem solving
    4.  Persuasion and presentation skills

5.  Distraction
6. Managing interaction
    4.   Substantive knowledge
(Honeyman, 1990).

The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) has embarked upon an initiative over the last two years to establish a "credentialed" roster of mediators for its own internal use to assist the public in its search for private mediators in non-labor cases. One of the hallmarks of such a credentialed roster would be that those who are selected to serve on it embody the characteristics of effective mediators.

Numerous focus groups that included mediators and academicians external to FMCS provided their view of such attributes. In addition to subject matter content, this group listed the following abilities as those most vital to the success of a mediators work with the parties: information gathering and synthesis, communication skills, relationship skills, process skills, appreciation for diversity, ability to relate to diverse parties, and commitment to high ethical standards (FMCS Interim Report 2001).

The FMCS itself, in its "Recruitment Bulletin," lists six qualifications that virtually parallel the ones listed among those cited earlier. In addition to its required knowledge, skills, and abilities section (KSA's), wherein technical laws governing collective bargaining, economics, and labor and business practices are listed, the FMCS expects that for mediators to be hired they must also possess the following KSA's:

.        The ability or potential to assess, design, deliver, and evaluate processes aimed at
         improving relationships
.        Knowledge of conflict resolution
.        Faculty for sound presentation and facilitation skills which include effective communication skills
.        The ability to chair meetings and lead discussions
.        The ability to use personal computers
.        The knowledge of design and implementation of conflict resolution systems….
(Bulletin number MED-01)

And yet, regardless of the tasks, knowledge, or "parameters" that researchers list, indicators for satisfaction among the parties using mediation may focus on different variables. Robert A. Baruch Bush found that the most frequently given party responses for satisfaction with the mediation process depended upon how important the participants felt during the mediation itself. Mediation allowed them to present their views fully and gave them a sense of being heard, and while helping them to understand each other.

Parties' favorable attitudes toward mediation stemmed largely from their perception of how the process worked, with two features in particular being most responsible:
    1.   The greater degree of participation in decision-making that parties
         experience in mediation.
    2.   The fuller opportunity to express themselves and communicate their
         views, both to the neutral and each other  (Baruch Bush, 1997).

Conversely, when mediation programs denied the parties real process control, party satisfaction levels were very low. Baruch Bush concluded that, despite what we might have thought, parties to mediation do not place the most value on the fact that a process provides expediency, efficiency, or finality of resolution. In fact, the likelihood of a favorable substantive outcome was not most important to the parties. Rather, an equally, if not more highly valued feature of mediation was "procedural justice or fairness," which in practice means the greatest possible opportunity for party participation in determining outcome, as opposed to the assurance of a favorable outcome, and for party self-expression and communication  (Baruch Bush, 1989).

When one looks at the compilations of these lists and compares the similar traits and characteristics of competent mediators among them, it is difficult to not be struck by the complexity in human dynamics described. It is unreasonable to expecting school children, some as young as pre-teens, to be able to practice all or most of them with their peers who may well be at risk for violent and dangerous behaviors. Once again, peer mediation programs certainly have their value and should be fully supported, but more assistance is required to provide students, as a body, with the benefits of mediation practice as described above. That must include these attributes and characteristics that go far beyond the very limited venue

provided for by the peer mediation programs utilizing students and children in cases that potentially go well beyond their comprehension, ability, and resources.

While I have listed mediator characteristics, traits, and attributes, there is special consideration for some of those listed by Baruch Bush that deserve special consideration in a school setting. His research indicated that of most importance to participants in mediation were the following items that existential psychology and attachment theory corroborate for school settings:

Participants need to feel:
.	Their own issues are important
.	They can present their views fully
.	That they are being heard
.	They understand each other
.	They are greatly participating
.	They can express themselves to each other and the neutral party
.	They perceive fairness in the system
.	They can achieve self-expression

If one is willing to accept the list of preferred mediator attributes as acceptable for the most part, unlike the labor, employment, commercial, statutory, or even family and court settings wherein these practices are commonly viewed, the school setting is inherently different. Even assuming the eight points listed immediately above would transfer seamlessly to a school setting, the school setting is still inherently different in myriad ways.

When parties come together in a voluntary manner to engage in a mediated forum they generally insist on the confidentiality of the content and the proceedings, and perhaps even in the agreement. For occasional strategic reasons they may even object to publicizing that a mediation meeting has taken place. Children at risk in school settings may desire much more than that, craving initial anonymity as either the person at risk or the person with knowledge of a potentially violent or dangerous activity about to take place.

Nowhere is the desire for self-expression more apparent than in our public schools, from dress, to language, to behavior, through self-doubt and the search for self-identity. Nowhere else is there a stronger desire for understanding, the idealism of fairness, or need to be heard both within and without the family structure. The challenge, then, is to devise a method by which these needs can be met, and to determine what new approaches can be utilized so that the mediator can gain access into the closed world of school-age children.

In traditional mediation environments, parties may seek a mediator, or at least respond if invited. Mediator prevention and response can be effective only in those instances where at least a primary communication link is established. As has been argued in the first parts of this paper, a world of computer realities, video worlds, and communication channels alternative to human interaction is commonplace among youth today. Their ease with technology in all of its forms far outstrips the average adult parent or guardian. A logical place to start, then, is to create an outreach mechanism through a medium that children understand, utilize themselves, and that affords a variety of third-party neutral functions that can initiate dialogue at minimum and, once established, go well beyond that.

TAGS: A Tool for Outreach, Collaboration, Connectivity, and Follow-Up

TAGS stands for Technology Assisted Group Solutions, a tool that has been established and is still undergoing continuous development by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service over the last two years. This tool relies upon a powerful network of computers and customized software that skilled FMCS mediators use to help groups solve problems more effectively, make better decisions, implement decisions more successfully, facilitate remote meetings, and conduct surveys from anyplace a computer browser can connect to the Internet.

Through the use of TAGS participants engage more openly and honestly, share knowledge and opinions more constructively, generate better ideas, and build stronger commitment to joint action. One may think of TAGS as a virtual conference center, a center that enables participants to enter by clicking a link in an e-mail message or by entering their user ID and password at the TAGS Web Site.

Students may go directly to a prescribed topic, survey, or other set of questions in order to initiate a school mediation.  They might enter a secure, virtual conference room, and communicate via a computer with a mediator, counselor or psychologist.  They can engage in a "live" remote meeting, an asynchronous (different time or place) brainstorming session, seize an opportunity to assess ideas, or simply ask for help anonymously.

Students may be hesitant to engage in a group discussion or real, live, chat room about school violence or problems at school.  They may fear being targeted by their friends and fellow students, or even ostracized for their thoughts and conversations.  However, in a TAGS meeting, the students simultaneously contribute ideas with easy-to-use software on a network of computers.  All ideas immediately post to an electronic flip chart displayed on each person's computer and on a large screen at the front of the room.  Participants build on others' ideas and continue to offer new thoughts in their own words with complete anonymity.

TAGS can provide a forum in which participants can categorize and prioritize ideas using electronic "ballots" to anonymously indicate their level of support for each idea, view tabulated results on-screen, and discuss results in an effort to reach consensus.  Greater participation from among a much wider student spectrum is likely, as opportunities exist in which students may contribute ideas safely, conveniently, and through a method with which they are already comfortable from nearly anyplace, including the security of their own homes or a public library.

This technology does not replace expert mediation skills and human exchange among participating students in face-to-face meetings.  Instead, the mediator uses this technology to enhance interaction and outcomes by focusing on the ideas contributed by those who may be less comfortable speaking out due to self-esteem issues or a perceived lack of status or confidence among certain participants.

TAGS reaches out to students through a common approach, from their video world and computerized universe, speaking to them in a language they currently know and utilize every day.  We know that, to a great degree, self-perception is based on what is reflected back from parents, peers, and authority figures.  In the societal problems described in the above sections, we have mentioned a major cause of loneliness and attachment problems encountered by children who may be at risk for dangerous behavior. We know through countless studies that, in order to fill this void, students are vulnerable to gangs, and that what is needed are caring parents and teachers to nurture and protect them.  In order to do that, to be able to step in and perform proactively, the students' potential support system must have access to indicators of at-risk behavior that are observable to be preventable.  The TAGS system provides the technology to assist mediators and peer groups so that the connections are made possible and, once established, reinforced.

Because of the versatility of TAGS and its many features, numerous additional, otherwise impossible, benefits may be gleaned.  These include the following:

> 1.  Literally, twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, communication is possible beyond the
> Immediate, or the present to an asynchronous system, if necessary, via the computer, thus enabling students the freedom to express themselves in ways that    go beyond the constraints of normal school, patient, or business  hours with those who may be trained to assist or treat them.

> 2.  Confidentiality, and if preferred, anonymity is afforded the  students.  One need never even know that
> they are either seeking help or reporting on incidents that trouble them.  And thus, are
> more likely to do so in time, before violence acts actually occur out of emotion and
disconnectedness.

> 3.   A closed chat room, one that is safe, operated by a professional  mediator, is possible. For instance, an FMCS mediator may be a resource on-line and consulted continuously, regardless of proximity, for advice, recommendations, and to establish the first step in a one-on-one relationship with a health professional in the student's community if necessary.

4.   Immediate access to mediation experts is an important resource for peer mediators who want to be helpful but need assistance in a particular case or someone with whom to consult regarding next steps.

5.  Fast access to health and emergency care or public safety specialists, mental, emotional, and             physical in those instances in which there is real danger or threat of depression, suicidality, and violence.  Anonymity may well be the catalyst that provides the necessary impetus for this essential reporting to take place, both to respond and to take preventive measures.

6. Increased administrative responsibility, and the establishment of a  tracking method for accountability and follow through.  School and other officials can detect patterns of behavior and response, as well as testing various measures to deal with school environmental changes to ascertain if procedures are making progress to deter violence and create a better and safer environment.

7. Synergistic idea generation as is usual with TAGS brainstorming.  Since TAGS always provides a safe forum for idea generation, whole groups can explore a multitude of ways in which school responses to bullying, isolation, and loneliness can be addressed and confronted.  As described earlier, in a TAGS approach to brainstorming ideas are submitted by all parties simultaneously, constantly reviewed both on individual and public screens, and are built upon confidentially.  There is no filtering necessary by the mediator/facilitator in a meeting, no self-censorship, no hierarchal power relationships, and no exclusion by extroverts that prevent introverts from participating freely.

8.  Assessment tool for surveys regarding safety concerns, creating and maintaining a nurturing atmosphere for learning in schools.  One the hallmarks of the TAGS system is to efficiently gather information in an easy-to-use method that can quickly compute data, determine the voting patterns of respondents, and reach closure for action steps.

9. Connecting those who may otherwise be without support with the widest possible network of others to whom they can relate.  Through TAGS, collaboration is made not only possible, but also relatively easy.  From dealing with bullies to exploring options for those in personal crises, TAGS' connection to experts and the resources of the Internet allow those participating to control access to their private information and yet create outreach to a larger collaborative community of others with similar concerns in school systems around the nation.

10. As described earlier, disconnectedness and isolation creates nearly unbearable loneliness in certain individuals.  In our extremely impersonal society, with the industrialization of school systems that create fear and chaos in children entering middle school, overcoming certain language barriers is an important consideration that must be considered for the future.  Utilizing TAGS and its translation tools function, students not only have the capability of utilizing the computer, but also now can do so in their language of origin through immediate software language conversion selections.  This enhances this communication ability and lowers their frustration to be understood, a vital aspect in mediation satisfaction addressed earlier.

11.  There is no effective way at this time for schools from across the country to share ideas, problems, and responses.  Geographic separations of thousands of miles prevent those who are working on these problems simultaneously to work with each other to educate and prevent future disasters.  Through the TAGS computer technology, same time and same place meetings are seldom necessary, and, when they are, they become more efficient because much of the work can be done before a face-to-face conference takes place.  Shared needs, solutions, resources, studies, and expertise will all contribute to an economy of scale and greater effectiveness.

12.  The accumulation of raw, confidential data regarding age and gender-specific problems for future research on continuous basis is possible as information bases are established and maintained for the future to further study the causes of violence described earlier.

FMCS currently employs the use of TAGS in face-to-face meetings and on the Internet. TAGS-enabled Electronic Conference Centers are available for FMCS customers in Atlanta, Cleveland, Minneapolis,

Oakland, Las Vegas, Newark and Washington, D.C.  FMCS has yet to integrate TAGS usage in schools, however, to specifically aid in dealing with violence and to augment peer mediation programs.  At present, when TAGS is utilized in online/ remote meetings, participants are given a special user ID and password. They use a telephone for the conference call and their own computers or PDA's to access their meeting data via our Internet site.  If they have neither, they can use one of almost a dozen FMCS Electronic Conference Centers for access. There are no requirements beyond a browser and an Internet connection.  Flip-charting, document work, action planning, and printing is easily accomplished.  Also, reference documents and contracts can be downloaded at the click of a button.  It is the FMCS's intention to utilize its resources to establish TAGS schools systems in numerous schools across the country in order to battle school violence as described in this research paper with the techniques described above. By the methods presently incorporated here, user confidentiality is assured, as is an improvement in outreach among individuals with enhanced communication.

What must be additionally established is the commitment in each community to build the structure of support required for these new technologies to function effectively.  This requires collaboration between parent and teacher groups, endorsement by school officials to establish policies that refute neglect and complacency, and the establishment of a network of trained health care professionals who can maintain and advance the use of appropriate psychological models to treat children in distress.  Communicators of violence through all electronic means, be they computer, video, and other media must be likewise accountable for the atmosphere of promotion and acceptability that has contributed to youth who are oblivious to the desensitization that has developed over the past fifty years of mass violence observations.

While TAGS provides extraordinary benefits, only trained mediators in this system should be a part of those teams employed to use it. By its very nature it provides personal access and creates potential vulnerability among users because they feel freer to participate.  Only those willing to follow careful ethical guidelines of confidentiality and neutrality and those well-trained and versatile in mediation practices should be in positions to gather such data to assure the anonymity this system provides.

Mediation in the schools with the proper tools can take the focus of conflict beyond personalities and help parties face themselves honestly and without demonizing their perceived enemies.   Recognizing that the sources of conflict are within is the first step.  TAGS is there to aid in navigating these dangerous waters. With the help of a mediator, this system can assist in exploring both the internal and external frontiers of conflict resolution and moves the parties along a series of practical first steps of reporting, assessment, and response that may include professional help.

Helping parties reach forgiveness and reconciliation is vital when dealing with disturbed youngsters.  The ongoing support that schools must provide includes understanding cultural, and organizational systems, as well as discovering ways of encouraging personal transcendence through heartfelt communication. FMCS believes that sparking awareness and reframing conflict situations can create empathy, compassion, and a resolution of an individual's conflicting realties and hidden narratives.  Leaving individuals in the midst of their own fear and rage is not an option. A system of personal coaching and assistance that works by reaching students through their own frame of reference is what is required. Outreach to assuage powerful emotions of anger, shame, fear, grief, and passive-aggressive behavior is essential.   Existential psychology mandates that trust, forgiveness, and reconciliation must start with the individual's feeling of connectedness.  Mediation through computer outreach can start them down this road.   And that is a good beginning toward reconciliation, release and genuine closure.

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